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# **BRICK RURAL LIFE SCHOOL**

**BRICKS, NORTH CAROLINA**

NEILL A. McLEAN, *Director*

[ 1938 ? ]



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## LOCATION AND SUPERVISION

Brick Rural Life School is located at Bricks, North Carolina, two miles south of Enfield on the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad and on the Coastal Highway from Richmond, Virginia, to Jacksonville, Florida. It is nineteen miles north of Rocky Mount.

The school is operated under the auspices of the American Missionary Association Division of the Board of Home Missions of the Congregational and Christian Churches of 287 Fourth Avenue, New York, N. Y.

FRED L. BROWNLEE.  
*General Secretary*

RUTH A. MORTON  
*Director of Schools*



## I AM A TILLER OF THE SOIL

I am a tiller of the soil,  
A farmer true and plain;  
I love my home, its life and toil,  
Its field and wooded lane;  
Where countless flowers are growing  
With beauty rich and rare;  
Mine is the fountain flowing,  
And mine the bracing air.

I heard from youth the cheerful choirs  
Of birds above the moor;  
They taught me when my heart desires  
On wings of song to soar;  
Behind the plow and harrow  
And ringing scythe I sing;  
Till woods and valley narrow  
With cheerful echoes ring.

And when the busy day is spent  
And sunset paints the West,  
My mind refreshed, my heart content,  
Mid loved ones I rest.  
And in my homelife ever,  
My spirit finds rebirth;  
And I will change it never,  
With any man on earth.

—K. OSTERGAARD  
*An Old Danish Folk Song*



# BRICK RURAL LIFE SCHOOL

by

FRED BROWNLEE

and

RUTH MORTON

Brick Rural Life School is the natural outgrowth of a process in education and community service, begun on a plantation near Enfield, North Carolina a half century ago. Mrs. Joseph K. Brick of Brooklyn inherited the place. No one had prospered there since the Civil War. Nurtured in the abolitionism of Henry Ward Beecher of Plymouth Church and New England Congregationalism, it is not surprising that she asked the American Missionary Association to help her transform the mansion house into a school, and utilize the farm in helping the liberated slaves to stand on their own feet economically and socially.

From a simple primary school the institution grew to be a high school and later a Junior College. Meanwhile, however, an awakened public conscience which brought general assistance from educational foundations, led to the development of free public schools throughout North Carolina. A few years ago the state, in cooperation with Edgecombe, Nash, and Halifax Counties, whose county lines converge at the Brick Plantation, established a free primary and secondary rural school which they called Brick Tri-County School. The American Missionary Association granted the free use of such buildings at Brick as were needed and assisted in securing buses. They also helped in paying the

TRI-COUNTY  
SCHOOL  
STUDENTS



salaries of home-economics and vocational agriculture teachers and county-wide agriculture and home-making demonstration agents.

At the same time the junior college work was discontinued, since the state had already built one four-year college and several two-year colleges for the training of Negro teachers. Moreover, there were three substantial private colleges for Negroes in the state, a four-year public college of liberal arts, and a progressive college of agriculture and industrial arts. This precluded the necessity for the American Missionary Association to enter the four-year college area, along standardized lines, either in the field of liberal or industrial arts, thus leaving us free to work in the field of adult education and community service along unstandardized lines.

In re-thinking our philosophy of education, we have tried to take into consideration the current social scene in America. We have taken religious and educational agencies realistically and have searched diligently the fundamental meanings and purposes of missionary service. It has seemed to us that we are living, as it were, near the closing of one era and the dawn of another—characterized on the one hand by over-institutionalized and standardized churches, schools, and colleges, and on the other by a demand that religion and education function in making living secure, wholesome, meaningful, and priceless.

As we came to close grips with how to proceed we realized more keenly than ever the futility of building educational programs, formal or informal, and preaching religious idealism unless at least people's elemental wants are undergirded with economic security. Institutionalized education and religion continues to fail in at least two ways which are absolutely essential to the maintenance and development of the good life so far as the masses are concerned. Such forms of education and religion seek to make respectable the outmoded capitalistic laissez-faire economics and would have their students and patrons complacently accept a social and economic order which makes possible a moneyed aristocracy. Economic security for the social group as a whole may be had only through educational and religious processes which grow out of the economic patterns of the areas in which people live, and are effectively geared into a general economic



system which guarantees the basic needs of everyone. At the same time we must assure a critical awareness on the part of everyone, that to grow, society must constantly adjust itself to change.

Facing these larger facts in the light of their relation to rural life it seemed that the free and cooperative ways of the Scandinavian countries with their Folk Schools and cooperative agricultural enterprises offered suggestive methods of service at Brick. With such thoughts in mind, Brick Rural Life School was opened July 1, 1936 under the direction of Mr. Neill A. McLean, who was studying at the Agriculture School of Cornell University at the time. He had been graduated from the Agriculture School of Hampton Institute and had taught at Alcorn College in Mississippi and at Hampton.

Since the economic pattern of the Brick community is agricultural and since for two generations the Brick Farm has been a tenant farm, we are building our program on those foundations. We believe that there are no short cuts leading to successful farming, and farm ownership and management. We are wide awake to the futility of placing an ignorant and untrained man on a forty acre farm with a good house, barn, out-buildings, implements, mules, cows, and chickens and with forty years to pay for them, and expect him—presto—to become a successful farmer.

#### NEAT HOUSES AND ORDERLY SURROUNDINGS



Hence, we are continuing our tenant farm system, but on an educational five-year rotating basis. In other words, we are trying to train tenants to the point at which they will be both disposed and prepared to become farm owners and managers through genuine individual and cooperative practices. If, with five years of such educational experience—learning by doing—a tenant farmer is not disposed and prepared to become a farm owner, we believe that he should make way for a more ambitious and enterprising tenant. Each family has a house, barn, and forty acres of land. The old central barn has been torn down and the material used in constructing individual barns.

Each farmer is required to till his land scientifically, fertilize the soil, comply with government restrictions, enter into community and national plans for soil erosion and reforestation, and in all other ways take his full share of social responsibility. He pays a fair rate of rent, the rent being used toward the expenses of the school. He is required to keep an account of all his farm and household receipts and expenditures with the constant thought in mind that he must be getting out of debt with the "man in town" and start saving for his own farm. His accounts are audited weekly by Mr. McLean and suggestions made for more economical ways of living.

For the first time some of the farmers are growing their own wheat and having it milled into flour. The results are convincing. It is refreshing to see waving wheat fields where only cotton, tobacco, and peanuts have been grown before. In this same gradual and patient way we are working toward rotation of crops and the dethronement of King Cotton in line with Dr. Howard Odum's ideas expressed in "Southern Regions" and Mr. Gerald Johnson's summary thereof in "The Wasted Land".

The women are learning to grow vegetable gardens. They are becoming expert in the canning of surplus vegetables and fruits. They are cooperating in making their homes more orderly and beautiful. Anticipating this, Mr. Charles B. Austin, a former member of our executive committee, gave them flower seeds and showed them how to make flower gardens. Today their garden club is one of the thriving organizations at Brick. Houses have been painted, sagging doorsteps repaired and the windows all have panes. It is a joy to drive along the highway and see the newly painted barns, the neat houses and the orderly surroundings.

As the Brick plantation takes on new dress, the surrounding countryside takes note, with the result that we find houses being repaired and painted for miles in all directions, better farming being done, new barns being built, and a general condition of improvement throughout the countryside.

The old bogey of debt has been hanging over our tenant farmers and those of the Brick community, for generations, keeping them worried and fearful of the future. Our group were meeting frequently to discuss this problem, when the community folk asked to sit in and soon began to take part in the lively conversations. In their great perplexity Mr. McLean told them of the way of the credit union, in which they would deposit their own savings, and loan money to each other. This was a new and unheard of idea, but the farmers voted to try it, never guessing how difficult it would be. Membership shares were to cost five dollars each, this amount to be paid at the rate of twenty-five cents per month if the obligation could not be met in any other way. Now at the end of two years, practically all the charter members have paid for their shares, and a number of loans have been made.

The idea of saving had not occurred to them because the inner workings of the share-cropping method made saving impossible. The systematic requirements in this respect, and the occasional pressure brought by the credit union to make members meet their obligations opened up a new way of life. The value of this little organization has not been so much in the amount of money saved or loaned, but in the education for economy and thrift, and the sense of awakened pride in beginning to "stand on one's own feet." Incidentally, the success of this credit union has led to the organization of two more in adjoining regions.

Keeping books and figuring prices make arithmetic live. For the first time in their lives our farmers began to see how much they were paying in interest for "furnishing" by the landlord. With this realization there came a great urge to free themselves from debt. Gradually, these shackles of economic slavery are falling off, but the way is long and hard. Moreover, the members know that before we can recommend them for a government loan, which can be repaid over a long-time period, they must prove that they are capable of making systematic repayments.



FIRST SHORT-TERM SCHOOL GROUP

## THE SHORT TERM SCHOOL

From the beginning of the project we have had a feeling that there should be some way whereby ideas could be crystallized more rapidly, with discussions more continuous, and learning to do things collectively, more frequent. The farmers themselves wanted to "learn more faster." This led to the organization of the Short-Term School within the total set-up of our Rural Life School Program.

The Short Term School is held in the winter months of January and February when the farm work is slack. It is conducted for adults (above the age of eighteen), who wish to benefit by the "Brick idea." The tenants on the Brick farm attend, together with other landowning or tenant farmers, and their sons and daughters. These folk, married and unmarried, come to live at the school for a period of six weeks, to participate in the simple group life which is based on the needs of everyday living. During this time persons who have had opportunities to range farther in life, dig more deeply into its meanings, and are gifted to teach, join the group. They enrich each other's experiences and add purpose to each other's lives through thinking, working, playing, and worshipping together. Somewhat more systematically, yet with freedom equal to that of the larger, year-round Rural Life

School, programs are organized around the basic areas of living, such as—making a living, keeping well and strong, home-making, being a cooperative member of the community in which one lives and of society at large, having a worth-while good time, and building a religiously meaningful philosophy of life and scale of values.

What the farmer should get for his cotton, tobacco and peanuts, or what he might grow to better advantage are of basic concern. How he may avoid the loan shark, manage his farm economically and systematically; produce, raise, and market chickens and hogs successfully, and how far it pays to go with cows; how a farmer may keep his own buildings and implements in repair at great savings in time and money—all these and many more equally pertinent and practical questions for farmers are discussed.

For the farm women such questions as these stand out: how to transform a house into a home; planning meals with a variety of food or the same food prepared in different ways; serving, and canning food, and the relation of diet to health; the value of beauty in form, arrangement and color in homemaking; economy and efficiency in laundering; common sense in buying at the store; the bearing of children, and caring for them in body, mind, and soul; how far husbands and wives may share farming and homemaking as common enterprises.

In the field of social living the group wrestles with such problems as how groups of families may best manage the affairs which affect them in common—by democracy or a group overlord; how these ideas apply to the immediate community, the county, state, region, and country; what makes for harmony and good will between employer and employee; what causes war and how we may maintain peace; who are responsible, in the last analysis, for the kind of society in which we live; is any single race ordained to lord it over all other races, the place of the Negro race in relation to others, etc., etc. In this connection there are usually several young folk attending the school who will be continuing in college within a few years. Eagerly they seek to learn the social interpretation of present day trends in order that intelligent thought may accompany their study of facts. Perhaps this is one of the greatest contributions of the Short-Term School.

"All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy," is just as true for the farmer lad as it is of the city boy. In the country, people either work from sun-up to sun-down or spend hours just sitting around. As one farmer put it, "Sometimes I sit and think and sometimes I just sit." Enriching leisure time is a definite aim at the Brick Short-Term School—how we may have good times together, learning to play many kinds of games, participation in dramatics, folk dancing, group singing, reading out loud, telling funny stories, animated conversation, writing plays, poems and songs and in having an all-round, jolly good-time.

Then since this school is a process in sharing the best that life has to offer, and since we do not have to follow a daily schedule unless we choose, we have time to wonder and philosophize. We wonder at the stars and moon by night, and at the sun by day. We wonder at the mystery of birth and life, of growth and death in plants, animals, and human beings alike; we wonder at how nature got started, what keeps it going and to what end, if any, it continues. At times our hearts swell with gratitude for it all; again we are distressed and dismayed. We turn to the Bible for help and to other great books; we listen to what others have to say about it. We have ideas of our own which often we are afraid to tell to others because we think we are so different. At the Brick Short-Term School such things are talked over freely. No one needs to be afraid of anyone else. We rejoice over differences and call no one "peculiar."

Out of our experience we try to make order—symmetry, harmony, beauty and loveliness. We talk much about beauty in life and loveliness in character; we become intelligent in making our homes more beautiful and their surroundings more pleasing. We discover that barns and barn yards, wood piles and hay stacks may be made beautiful; we tell the names of birds we already know and learn to know others; we identify the flowers and trees in the woodland; we tell each other of the flowers we like best and want most in our own gardens; and why the proportions of a room affect our souls. Worship takes on new meaning because life itself becomes meaningful.

Sometime ago a group of farm women sitting over their sewing and discussing the new day at Brick raised the question as to why we could not have our own church service, where, in-



MAKING HOMES MORE BEAUTIFUL AND  
SURROUNDINGS MORE PLEASING

stead of constantly calling upon the Lord for a chance to go to some far-off heaven, we might enter into a companionship with the Eternal now, in working toward a finer life on this earth. A young minister in Enfield who had been intrigued by the work at the farm volunteered his services, and so from Sunday to Sunday the community folk gather in the chapel to dedicate themselves to the task they have before them. Thus social experience becomes religious and religious experience, social.

It is hard to define the difference between the Short-Term School and the Rural Life School. Indeed they are not different. The Short-Term session is merely an attempt to concentrate a little more intensely upon the ideas that are being carried on daily throughout the year. Progress in the entire project has not been rapid. Much is to be done along all the lines mentioned, and as we move forward undreamed avenues of endeavor and opportunity are sure to open up before us.

The influence of the school has extended over a wide area, for young people coming from a distance to the Short-Term School return home to plant the seeds of an awakening life in other communities. The demand for leadership in other rural areas is growing.

Last winter at the close of the Short-Term School we stepped into the church to worship with the community folk before our train should bear us away. When the opening hymn was announced we began to sing:

Break Thou the bread of life,  
Dear Lord to me,  
As Thou didst break the loaves  
Beside the sea.  
Beyond the sacred page  
I seek thee Lord,  
My spirit pants for Thee  
O Living Word.

In the early afternoon Mr. McLean took us in his car for one last look at the homes on the farm and in the community that had begun to change so from that first time we had seen them. As we greeted one farmer and his wife and said that we had come to say goodbye they smiled and he said, "Well, it surely is good to feel that perhaps there is a chance for you in this world."

We looked out over broad acres of land, rich and healthy because they are being properly cared for, and knew that before long they would be beautiful with the first green shoots of the spring crops. Men and women are coming here knocking at the door of spiritual freedom, and the door is opening unto them.

We were making our last call. Just the week before we had been able to help this farmer free himself from a local loan shark and secure a government long-term loan. He owns his own mules, and his cows now, and within a few years should be able to leave our land and have a little home of his own. He held his shoulders straight and when he shook hands, his clasp was firm. His eyes shone with happiness. His wife followed him shyly but smilingly and said she was glad we had come to see her flowers. We talked of the beauty and the change that are dawning at Brick, when the farmer suddenly cut across our conversation with the remark, "You know I just can't tell you how a man feels to get out of such an awful debt. It's as if life had started all over again. Why, it's like the preacher said this morning, even your religion begins to live."





WE TALKED OF BEAUTY AND CHANGE

## SPECIAL EVENTS

The Brick Rural Life School was begun July 1, 1936. Some of the special features sponsored since then are:

National Youth Administration training camp for girls. There were ninety girls with a staff of ten instructors.

Inter-Church Ministerial Conference. The theme of the conference was "Character Building Through Functional Religion".

Leadership Training Camp held by the North Carolina Chapter of the New Farmers of America. About one hundred and twenty-five Vocational Agriculture students and teachers participated in this camp.

Non-denominational Church and Sunday School established at Brick. Because there was no church or organized Sunday school nearer than two and one-half miles, the community

workers thought it best to establish one at Brick. The people show their appreciation of the religious activities by attending all services.

First Annual Brick Community Fair. This fair was organized to promote interest among farming people in this community in becoming better farmers with a well balanced cropping system and a profitable income.

Two annual meetings of the Brick Community Federal Credit Union.

Organization of a Community Flower Garden Club by Mr. Asa Sims. This club was organized at our last session and it has resulted in many beautiful yards at Brick and the vicinity.

Two sessions of the Short-Term School.



ENROLLMENT 1937 AND 1938  
SHORT - TERM SCHOOL SESSIONS

ADAMS, CHARLES  
ADAMS, ELLA  
ANDERSON, JIMMIE  
ARRINGTON, WHEATLEY  
BLUFORD, F. D.  
BOWENS, EDDIE F.  
BOWENS, LINA V.  
BROWN, D. L.  
BROWN, MARY  
BROWNLEE, FRED L.  
BULLOCK, MAGNOLIA  
CLANTON, NORMAN  
DAVIS, SUSIE  
DAWES, SALLY  
DEAN, C. E.  
DIXON, H. L.  
EPPS, WILLIE  
FENN, DONALD F.  
FOBBS, BENJAMIN, SR.  
FOBBS, LOUISE  
FORNEY, LULU  
FORNEY, JULIA H.  
FORNEY, HARDING H.  
FORNEY, H. G.  
GARRETT, ARSTELIA  
GARRETT, RICHARD  
GARRETT, ROBERT  
GAYLORD, MRS. D. G.  
GAYLORD, DORSEY G.  
GAYLORD, MRS. D. C.  
GRAY, NANNIE  
GRAY, NEANA  
HARPER, JOSEPH  
HIGGINBOTHAM, J. S.  
HILL, HARRY  
HILLIARD, MRS. G.  
HILLIARD, GEORGE  
HINES, J. P.  
HEMMONS, CORDELIA

JORDAN, WILLIAM H.  
KITTRELL, FLEMMIE P.  
KLINCK, M. S.  
KNIGHT, D. J.  
LINDSEY, CHRISTINE  
LINDSEY, LUTHER  
LYONS, DULBERT  
LYONS, HENRY  
MCLEAN, CARRIE L.  
MCLEAN, IVA  
MCLEAN, NEILL A.  
MORTON, RUTH A.  
PARKER, FLOSSIE J.  
PARKER, MILDRED  
PARKER, VERDELLA  
PHILLIPS, EVELYN  
PHILLIPS, JOHN R.  
PITMAN, V.  
REID, DEVAN  
REID, MARY D.  
ROGERS, ISAAC  
SHIELDS, BESSIE  
SIMS, ASA  
SMITH, EVELYN  
SPEIGHTS, T. R.  
SPELLMAN, PRISCILLA C.  
THOMAS, GLENDORA  
THOMAS, LEWIS  
THOMAS, L. S.  
VOHRINGER, JOHN  
WASHINGTON, DOUGLASS  
WHARTON, F. D.  
WILKINS, GERALDINE  
WILKINS, HAZELLA  
WILLIAMS, IDA M.  
WILLIAMS, JAMES  
WILLIAMS, LOLA MAE  
WILLIAMS, VANCE  
WYCHE, ELLIOTT

